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Empowering Cities to Make Immigrant Integration Happen

by Deniz Ay

Immigration is largely an urban phenomenon. Although the popular representation of international immigrants often corresponds to images from camp-settings, about 60% percent of the refugees live in cities worldwide.¹ One in every five international migrants lives in one of just 20 global cities, and for 18 of these cities, international migrants represent around 20% of their total population.² Immigrants arriving in large numbers, often in waves, is no longer unusual, yet global instability is growing due to several push factors ranging from armed conflicts to the climate crisis. If cities act as a node for the vast majority of immigrants, the quest for integration is inherently local and it starts inside cities.³ The question is: what role can cities play in reversing the narrative that turns an immigration background into a source of structural inequality? Answers to this question could help build up resilient societies that embrace diversity.

The majority of international migrants ending up in cities have been following either family members and community networks established by earlier migratory waves, or their dreams of better access to the social and economic opportunities associated with cities. Generations of immigrant communities have established ethnic enclaves in every cosmopolitan city. These established networks provide the social infrastructure and the immediate support that newcomers need to initiate the long process of integration. Receiving communities may also develop emergency responses, as they did for the massive influx of refugees to Western Europe in 2015. These self-organized voluntary measures helped to mitigate the crisis by addressing the short-term primary needs of newcomers such as food and shelter. But these ad-hoc community responses often fade away once the crisis has peaked.

When the short-term emergency response ends, immigrant integration emerges as a lingering challenge for cities. Access to decent housing, education and language training, and also to employment opportunities, are the most pressing challenges for integration. We can think of integration as the process of minimizing the social distance

between newcomers and established residents, and eliminating the differences in access to economic and political opportunities. Integration has three practical components: social, economic and political. Social integration is the mutual process of social bonding between the immigrant and the receiving communities. Social integration involves bilateral dialogue, understanding and respect, which make it a two-way process that involves both the newcomers and their hosts. Economic integration includes the incorporation of newcomers into the economic system, whether as employers or employees, thereby contributing to the wealth shared by the whole society, including the newcomers and the established inhabitants. Finally, political integration opens the door for immigrants to gain access to representation and participation in the political system.

In a real democracy, neither the place of birth nor the origin of a jobseeker's parents should be used to determine that applicant's employability, access to basic services, or their means of political participation and representation. These three aspects of immigrant integration are therefore also key determinants of a democratic city, where all residents have equal access to jobs, education, and basic services. With this formula we can move beyond the limited and technical interpretation of "immigrant integration" towards a more inclusive and practical approach that aims to minimize the social, economic and political barriers for new residents. As a natural consequence of this broader understanding of integration, any development towards better integration strategies would benefit all the denizens of a city, not just its immigrants. For instance, all newcomers with access to language and professional training for entering the labour market will soon start paying taxes to contribute to the city. Entrepreneurial immigrants create jobs and help to revitalize local economies and decaying neighborhoods, often by starting small businesses. To ensure the benefits of refugees and immigrants to their receiving communities, many cities in the USA have adopted comprehensive welcoming programmes and strategic plans with bipartisan support in order to achieve successful social, economic and political integration. These integration policies include providing access to education programmes for children and adults, developing capacity in immigrant and refugee leaders, and facilitating community building among receiving communities and the newcomers.

The city is organized on a scale that is efficient and effective to make integration happen. It is easier to develop integration policies addressing the specific local context on the scale of a city than to do the same at national level, its mainstream alternative. Despite the relevance of housing access to achieving social and economic integration, national housing policies fail to address the particular needs of newcomers. Also, cities differ

significantly in terms of their local housing markets or capacities to provide decent accommodation to these newcomers. Therefore national housing policies essentially have only limited capacity to address the immigrants' housing problems on the ground. Cities are able to address affordable and accessible housing by utilizing the knowledge of market conditions and developing targeted solutions as local as neighbourhood level. For instance, community housing is a tool used in several cities in Canada and Australia as a part of local affordable housing policies targeting immigrants. Policy innovations to combine housing and immigrant integration also include self-building housing projects implemented in Italy.⁴

Immediate access to language training, which is essential for all aspects of integration, is also easier to provide at city level. A successful example of such an initiative is run by "Hispi" in Düsseldorf, Germany. As a local non-governmental organization, Hispi⁵ recruits volunteers to assist immigrants in language acquisition since 2015. It is supported with donations from individuals and cooperatives, also partnerships with local businesses and the local government. Learning the language through direct social interaction with peers also initiates the building of a social network between the immigrants and newcomers. Cities have the flexibility to mobilize local capacities and coordinate volunteers to start the language training quickly rather than waiting for the state bureaucracy to provide access and allocate resources.

Monitoring and evaluating the integration policies are more feasible at city level because it is easier to collect data and feedback on policy performance at local level than at national level. This will improve capability to develop better strategies and local partnerships between the city governments and other local institutions such as universities, community-based organizations and non-governmental organizations focusing on immigration. A city-level agenda for integration is in stark contrast to the sluggish centralized policies guided by the state bureaucracy. National governments' integration policies start by classifying immigrants according to their legal status: asylum seekers, refugees, illegal immigrants, aliens, etc. A decentralized city-based approach to integration enables a departure from legal boundaries to what services people are entitled, and embraces a needs-based approach to supporting those in need.

Empowering cities to activate their promising potential to make immigrant integration happen will benefit their entire populations. These mechanisms may include transfers of financial and administrative powers from national/federal governments to the local level and distribute political and technical support via coalitions/platforms

between the cities themselves, namely the city networks. The potential of cities to speed up immigrant integration is already mobilized through the activities of various city networks. City networks operate under transnational institutions like the Intercultural Cities (ICC) programme of the Council of Europe, as a collective effort by several city governments, like Eurocities, and non-governmental organizations like Welcoming America in the USA. These city networks aim to empower cities through facilitating knowledge exchanges on integration practice and professional community-building for practitioners. One tangible outcome of these networks is the mobilization of innovative and progressive strategies for integration. These developments help city governments to think and act in partnership with their civil society, public and private sectors, going beyond their national governments' political and legislative boundaries. As progressive gestures these city networks also have the potential to affect their national/federal governments' policy frameworks, either by allowing greater autonomy to local governments to form immigration policy or by providing administrative support for implementing bottom-up integration strategies.

City networks also have symbolic functions such as legitimizing local integration efforts and positioning cities as welcoming places for immigrants.⁶ Activities of these city networks are funded through grants from various sources, including governments, supranational organizations, non-governmental organizations and corporate actors. Empowering these networks is a simple step towards helping cities to work together to create cooperation in order to develop and spread innovative local integration strategies. Learning and knowledge exchanges will also foster collaborations and solidarity between cities, which can trigger mechanisms reaching beyond their national boundaries to start building a global coalition for immigrant integration.

Empowering cities to lead the immigrant integration programmes will benefit the whole of society because successful city-level programmes can create tangible social, economic and political benefits for all. It is also possible to increase the role of cities in integration if the receiving communities demand and provide support to their cities' commitment to effective integration strategies. This political stance can become more widespread with the policymakers' and civil society's commitment to inform the general public about the "public benefits" of well-thought-out integration strategies. Often the barrier is not the lack of financial resources but rather the lack of popular support and political demand from those with socioeconomic privileges who block diversity policies that benefit both the established residents and the newcomers. In a city, political and practical mobilization is inherently easier compared to the national scale, given the closer proximity of the

official governing bodies to their electorates. This city-level approach to immigrant integration ultimately challenges the conventional idea of citizenship as membership of a nation. And with this political opening, a new progressive interpretation of citizenship, i.e. ‘*cityzenship*’, based on inhabitation and informed by human rights emerges as a more inclusive alternative that matches the contemporary global political conditions and the growing mobility of people.⁷

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 - 2 IOM (2015). World Migration Report. Migrants and cities: New partnerships to manage mobility. Geneva, Switzerland: IOM. https://publications.iom.int/system/files/wmr2015_en.pdf
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